The Position of Ibn ʿUthaymīn on Image-Making

By the shaykh:

ʿAbdurraḥmān bnu Nāṣir al-Barrāk

18/7/1428 AH

Source: (الدررالسنية) website.

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Introduction

Abū Idrīs al-Khawlānī, رحمه الله, said:

Muʿādh ibn Jabal, رضي الله عنه, said:

“Ahead of you are trials in which wealth will become abundant, and the Qurʾān will be widely circulated, until it is taken up by the believer and the hypocrite, the man and the woman, the young and the old, the slave and the free. Then a person will soon say: ‘What is wrong with the people that they do not follow me, when I have recited the Qurʾān? They will not follow me until I introduce something new for them.’

So beware of newly invented matters, for whatever is invented is misguidance. And I warn you against the deviation (i.e slip) of the scholar, for indeed Shayṭān may utter a word of misguidance upon the tongue of a scholar, and a hypocrite may utter a word of truth.”

He said: I said to Muʿādh: “How will I know—may Allah have mercy on you—that a scholar has said a

word of misguidance, and that a hypocrite has said a word of truth?”

He replied: "Yes. Avoid from the words of the scholar those statements that become widely known (for its falsehood) and about which it is said: ‘What is this?!’ But let that not turn you away from him, for perhaps he may retract. And accept the truth when you hear it, for indeed upon the truth there is light.”

Ṣaḥīḥ mawqūf. Reported by Abū Dāwūd (4611) and authenticated by al-Albānī in Ṣaḥīḥ Abī Dāwūd (3855).

Tr: Umm ʿAbdirraḥmān as-Sūdāniyyah.

Question

To the virtuous shaykh: ʿAbdurraḥmān bnu Nāṣir al-Barrāk — may Allāh grant him success.

Salāmun ʿalaykum wa raḥmatu Allāhi wa barakātuhu.

To proceed:
I have read the statements of the shaykh Muḥammad bnu Ṣāliḥ bnu ʿUthaymīn, may Allāh have mercy on him, concerning image-making, found in volume twelve of his Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā (Collected Fatāwā). I noticed in them matters that seem problematic, such as his statement: “Photography is not image-making, yet it is still not permissible to keep pictures for remembrance”, along with hesitation in some places regarding the ruling on image-making and on looking at certain images. I hope for your commentary on this.

Answer

Wa ʿalaykum as-salāmu wa raḥmatu Allāhi wa barakātuh.

الحمدُ للهِ رَبِّ العالمين، وصلَّى اللهُ وسَلَّم على محمَّدٍ وعلى آلِه وصَحْبِه أجمعين.

To proceed:
Whoever carefully examines the answers of the shaykh Muḥammad bnu Ṣāliḥ bnu ʿUthaymīn (may Allāh have mercy on him) concerning image-making, looking at images, and keeping them, will notice confusion in his conception of reality — meaning that he did not fully conceptualize the reality of the matter. Because of this, some strange statements appear in his words on this topic, which one would not expect from someone like him. May Allāh pardon him.

People of desires and lusts can take advantage of these statements to promote what they wish from visual media programs and to spread various kinds of images in newspapers and magazines.

The most important of the shaykh’s statements on this issue are his answers found in Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā, volume 12, pages 311–327. His discussion revolves around three issues:

1. The ruling on image-making.
2. Possessing images.
3. Looking at images.

The First Issue:
The Ruling On Picture-Making

The essence of his view on image-making is that it varies depending on what is being imaged, and the means used. Based on that, image-making according to him falls into three categories:

1. Permissible image-making — according to the correct view — which is imaging inanimate objects and plants.
2. Prohibited image-making — which is hand-drawing animate beings.
3. Disputed image-making — which is imaging animate beings using a camera.

From the apparent meaning of his words, the shaykh generally inclined toward permissibility of this type, as long as it does not lead to something

prohibited — in which case it becomes prohibited. He argued for this position as follows:

First: photography is not an act of the mukallaf (legally responsible person), and therefore is not considered image-making.

Second: camera imaging does not involve imitation of Allāh's act of creation; rather, it is merely copying the image Allāh created through a machine, with no action from the human except directing and moving the device. This copying does not depend on artistic skill or drawing knowledge.

He supported this with the example of copying handwriting in checks and documents — which is merely copying the writer's handwriting, not the handwriting of that who copied it using the machine. So it is said: This is the handwriting of so-and-so, the writer of the original handwriting.

This summarizes the argument of the shaykh. Others before him held similar views, calling it

"trapping shadows" and referring to camera imaging as "photographic imaging"[1].

In response to the first argument: This is not accepted. It is image-making linguistically and customarily. The device is called an imaging device (camera); its operator is called an image maker (photographer); the act is called image-making; and the result is called an image. This act is done by a mukallaf (legally responsible person) using a means. What proves that it is, is the fact that it carries legal rulings: it could be permissible or prohibited, as previously mentioned.

In response to the second argument: The claim that it does not involve imitation of Allāh's creation act is rejected. Imitation is intended by the photographer

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1 Translator's note: calling photographic imaging, which is "photography", is correct and accurate, and doesn't support the view of those declaring it permissible in any way, shape, or form. As the definition of "photography" is: To draw using light. Which is what cameras do. Instead of paint, they use light. Different means, same result.

and does occur.
Calling it “copying” is merely changing terminology and does not change reality or the ruling.
The image Allāh created does not move from its place. If it did, the original would cease to exist. An image is a property that does not exist independently; it cannot be described by “moving”, but by “ceasing”.

The image produced by the camera resembles the original image but it is not the original itself. This is evident by the photographer’s ability to resize, enhance, distort, or beautify it. Were it mere copying, such manipulation would be impossible.
So it is clear that making images using cameras is actual image-making, not “transferring” images Allāh created, because that is not possible, and because the photographer could manipulate the image resulting from using the camera.

As for an image of handwriting, one does not say: “This is so-and-so’s handwriting”, but rather, “This is an image of his handwriting”. Hence the distinction between originals and copies in documents: one is described as the original, and the other as a copy. In many important matters, copies are not relied upon for authentication; rather, the original must be presented.

Allāh knows best.

The Second Issue: The Ruling On Possessing Images

As for the second issue—the ruling on possessing images—the shaykh, may Allāh have mercy on him, held that possessing them for remembrance is prohibited, and that hanging them is also prohibited. He indicated that the Sunnah proves the prohibition of adopting and possessing images in cases other than what is subject to degradation. (Vol. 12, p. 325)

The Sunnah he referred to includes the ḥadīth of ʿĀʾishah, may Allāh be pleased with her, concerning the curtain (qirām) with which she covered a niche (i.e., a recess), and on which there were images. When the Prophet, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, saw it, he tore it, and his face changed color, and he said: “Those who will be most severely punished on the Day of Resurrection are those who

imitate the creation act of Allāh”. ʿĀʾishah said: We then made it into one or two cushions. Agreed upon.

Likewise his statement, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam: The makers of these images will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them: Give life to what you have created”. Then he said: “Indeed, a house in which there are images is not entered by the angels”. Agreed upon.

The shaykh, may Allāh be pleased with him, exhaustively presented the evidences regarding the ruling on possessing images in his long, detailed answer found in volume 12, pages 311–317.

In his view, it makes no difference whether the image is complete or incomplete if the head is present, based on the ḥadīth that Jibrīl, ʿalayhi as-salām, refrained from entering the house of Prophet, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, due to the

figure picture[1] at the door, and he commanded that its head be cut off so that it would resemble a tree. The shaykh, may Allāh have mercy on him, mentioned the statement of al-imām Aḥmad: “An image is the head”, and a similar statement is reported from Ibn ʿAbbās[2], may Allāh be pleased with him.

The shaykh emphasized that the ruling of an image does not cease unless the head is completely removed. It is as though he is pointing to what some deceivers do in attempting to permit the prohibited: photographing the body with its head, and separating them with a line.

He also explicitly stated the permissibility of possessing images—or items containing images—

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1 Translator’s note: The shaykh likely refers to a narration mentioning a statue; however, this is a weak addition by Yūnus b. Abī Isḥāq in Musnad Aḥmad. All other narrators report pictures of figures on a curtain, not a statue. Imām Aḥmad noted that Yūnus sometimes added details not found in other chains, which serves as a critique of his memorization.

2 See ((554 /4) سلسلة الأحاديث الصحيحة وشيء من فقهها وفوائدها)

when there is a need or necessity, such as images for identification, and the images found on currency.

He further clarified that what is prohibited to possess of images varies in severity depending on the intent of the possessor and the subject depicted, such as possessing images of great figures or images of women—especially when they are hung—this being more severely prohibited due to the evils entailed. He spoke well and beneficially on the issue of possessing these images, even when they are produced by a camera.

However, this weakens his view permitting the photographing of beings with souls using a camera. For holding photography by camera to be permissible while prohibiting possession of the image entails a kind of contradiction, indicating that his view permitting photography was not held with full reassurance/certainty (ṭumaʾnīnah).

This is supported by the fact that, in the detailed answer mentioned earlier, he explicitly stated that image-making using cameras falls under the ambiguous matters. After mentioning the disagreement, he said: “Caution is to refrain from it, for it is from the ambiguous matters, and whoever avoids doubtful matters has safeguarded his religion and his honor”. (Vol. 12, p. 312)

Based on the above, it becomes clear that it is not correct to attribute unrestricted permissibility of image-making using cameras to the shaykh. Rather, either it should be said: “He has two narrations on this issue”, or it should be said: “His view permitting it was not one he was fully at ease with, even though he argued for it using some rational specious arguments; he mentioned both views and the proofs of each side, and in most of his answers he inclined toward permissibility”.

The view of permissibility became widely known from him, and many students of knowledge and others adopted it by imitation. Likewise, people of desires latched onto it—those who take from scholars only what agrees with their desires. Thus the scourge of photography became widespread, and most people deemed it permissible, out of ignorance, imitation, and desire. None of this harms the shaykh; he was a great scholar, a mujtahid, sincerely seeking the truth. He either earns one or two rewards, if Allāh wills, for the mujtahid who is correct has two rewards, and if he errs, he has one reward.

Those who imitate the shaykh did not thoroughly examine all of his answers; therefore, they did not know the true nature of his position on this issue.

As for the people of desires, they are not concerned with verifying the scholar's actual view or fatwā. It suffices them to seize from him what accords with

their aims and can be clung to in order to promote their falsehood.

In the statements of scholars there is that which is considered ambiguous and must be referred back to their clear statements. The path of those who deviate is to follow the ambiguous from every speech, as Allāh, Exalted is He, says:

“So as for those in whose hearts there is a deviation (from the truth) they follow that which is not entirely clear thereof, seeking Al-Fitnah (polytheism and trials), and seeking for its hidden meanings” [Āl ʿImrān: 7],

and this is the source of the misguidance of the deviant sects of this ummah. We seek refuge in Allāh from the path of deviation and misguidance.

In summary, those who permit making images using cameras or photography fall into categories:

1. Mujtahid scholars sincerely seeking the truth and free of desire; they interpret photography accordingly. This group is small.
2. Mujtahid scholars whose ijtihād is influenced by pressure of reality and some degree of desire.
3. Imitators with good intentions.
4. Imitators driven by desire and lust—many among those affiliated with knowledge and religion.
5. Followers of their desires who do not care whether photography is lawful or unlawful; they repel criticism with specious arguments and disagreement. Allāh knows what they conceal and what they reveal. People in this matter are as Allāh, Exalted is He, says:
   “They are in varying grades with Allāh, and Allāh is All-Seer of what they do” [Āl ʿImrān: 163].

The Third Issue:
The Ruling On Looking At Images

As for the third issue—the ruling on looking at newspapers, magazines, and television—the shaykh, may Allāh have mercy upon him, elaborated according to both the type of image and the effect of viewing it.

He held that if the image is of animals (i.e., non-human), it is permissible to look at it; however, it is not permissible to possess newspapers solely for the sake of such images. If the image is of a human, there is more detailed guidance. He stated:

> "If the images are of humans, then if one looks at them for pleasure or enjoyment, it is prohibited. If, however, there is no pleasure or enjoyment, and neither the heart nor desire is stirred by it, and if the viewer is someone for whom looking is permissible—such as a

> man looking at another man, or a woman looking at another woman, or at a man as well, according to the strongest opinion—then there is no harm. But one should not possess the image for the sake of the images themselves”.

This is a good and unproblematic clarification.

However, he, may Allāh be pleased with him, added:

> “If the viewer is someone for whom looking is not permissible, such as a man looking at a non-maḥram woman, then this is a matter of doubt and hesitation”. (Vol. 12, p. 326)

He explained the source of this doubt and hesitation, which rests on two points:

First: His hesitation about the meaning of the ḥadīth:

> “A woman should not describe another woman to her husband as if he were looking at her”.

Does the prohibition concern describing the visible image—such as the beauty of the face—or describing what is covered under the clothing (the ʿawrah)?

The shaykh inclined to the second interpretation, based on the term *mubāsharah* (skin-to-skin contact) and on an-Nasāʾī’s addition in the ḥadīth: “A woman must not have skin-to-skin contact with another woman in a single garment”.

So it is said: Let’s assume the second meaning is intended, the prohibition on looking at a non-maḥram woman does not depend solely on this ḥadīth. Both the Qurʾān and Sunnah indicate the prohibition; Allāh, Exalted is He, said:

> “Tell the believing men to lower their gaze” [al-Mu’minūn: 30].

And the Prophet, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, said:

> “Do not follow one glance with another; the first one is yours, but not the second”.

Reported by al-imām Aḥmad and others from ʿAlī, may Allāh be pleased with him, and it is authentic through the totality of its chains.

Also, in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, Jarīr b. ʿAbdillāh, may Allāh be pleased with him, said: I asked the Prophet, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, about looking at women unexpectedly, and he commanded me to turn my gaze away.

Second: What caused hesitation in prohibiting looking at an image of a non-mahram woman without desire is his mention of the significant difference in impact between the actual woman and her image.

So it is to be said:

- **First**, this is not accepted absolutely; the image may in fact have a greater impact due to the enhancements, coloring, and careful highlighting of tempting features.
- **Second**, even if there is a difference between reality and images, and even if we accept in general, this goes against his argument permitting making images using cameras, where he stated that it is copying the image created by Allāh—this implies that it has an effect similar to the original.

Yes, if a non-maḥram woman is physically present and reachable, she has a greater effect on the viewer than her image.

From this, it becomes clear that looking at a picture of a non-maḥram woman carries the same ruling as looking at the woman herself. If there is a difference in effect, the more influential is the more prohibited.

All of this refers to looking at a non-maḥram woman or her image without lust. If it is with lust, the shaykh explicitly prohibited it absolutely.

He also mentioned a distinction regarding images of specific versus non-specific women:

- If the gaze is with lust, it is forbidden.
- If without desire:
    - If the image is of a specific woman, the shaykh remarked about the view which inclines toward prohibiting looking at it: “this is questionable”. (Vol. 12, p. 327)
    - For a non-specific woman, without desire, and with no risk of leading to sin, it is permissible.

The shaykh did not cite evidence for this nuanced distinction.

Summary: The shaykh’s view on making images using cameras is neither firmly settled nor

conclusively established. While his dominant statements appear to allow it, the supporting arguments are weak or internally inconsistent. Likewise, what he mentioned of detailing in the issue of looking at images of human beings includes aspects that do not hold up.

Likewise, his hesitation regarding the ruling on a man looking at the image of a non-maḥram woman, based on the claimed difference in the effect of looking at reality versus an image.

This detail and hesitation could be exploited by the people of deviant desires, who indiscriminately look at newspapers and screens.

And since most images published are intended to entice, attract attention, and satisfy desires, there is no foothold for the people of falsehood in the shaykh's statements: looking at images of alluring women in media to please viewers or readers is entirely prohibited according to the shaykh.

The ruling the shaykh affirmed on possessing images, however, is clear and unproblematic.

What I consider correct is that making images using cameras is prohibited, that it falls under the general evidences for the prohibition of image-making, that possessing images is prohibited, and that looking at images of those whom it is forbidden to look at—whether men or women—is also prohibited, and that the image, in this regard, is like reality itself.

It is appropriate here to mention a number of the narrations reported concerning the ruling on image-making:

Abū Hurayrah, may Allāh be pleased with him, reported that the Messenger of Allāh, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, said:
“Allāh, Exalted is He, said: Who is more unjust than one who goes to create like My creation? Let them

create a small ant, or let them create a grain, or let them create a barley seed". Agreed upon.

Also, in the two Ṣaḥīḥs, from ʿĀ'ishah, may Allāh be pleased with her, she said: The Messenger of Allāh, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, said: "The people who will receive the severest torment on the Day of Resurrection are those who imitate the [act of] creation of Allāh".

And in the two Ṣaḥīḥs, from Ibn ʿAbbās, may Allāh be pleased with them both, he said: I heard the Messenger of Allāh, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, say: "Every image-maker will be in the Fire; for every image he made, a soul will be created for him by which he will be punished in Jahannam".

And also from both of them [ʿĀ'ishah and Ibn ʿAbbās], raised to the Prophet, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam: "Whoever makes an image in this world will be charged with breathing a soul into it, and he will not be able to do so".

And in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, from Abū Juḥayfah, may Allāh be pleased with him, that the Messenger of Allāh, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam: "cursed the image-makers".

The narrations indicating the prohibition of depicting beings with souls, that it is among the major sins, and the prohibition of possessing images are many, well-known, and preserved in the canonical collections of the Sunnah.

And since it is known by necessity that the Sharīʿah of Muḥammad, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, is universal and lasting until the Hour, due to the universality of his message and the sealing of prophet-hood with him, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, then the rulings of his Sharīʿah—general and specific—are not confined to his time. Rather, they remain valid until the command of Allāh, Blessed is He and Exalted, comes. A group from this ummah will continue to remain manifest upon the

truth; those who forsake them or oppose them will not harm them until the Hour is established.

Therefore, the texts prohibiting image-making encompass every form of image-making by any means, whether it existed in his time, ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam, or appeared after him. And Allāh, who revealed this Sharīʿah, knows what means of image-making would arise. Thus, it is obligatory to judge by the texts of the Book and the Sunnah and to apply their general and unrestricted wording, unless there is established evidence necessitating specification or restriction. Likewise, they must be referred to when disputes arise, as Allāh, Exalted is He, says:

> "O you who believe, obey Allāh and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it back to Allāh and the Messenger, if you truly

believe in Allāh and the Last Day. That is better and best in outcome" [al-Nisāʾ: 59].

To conclude: it is upon everyone to fear Allāh, seek His pleasure, avoid what He has prohibited, and avoid that which leads to the prohibited from doubtful matters.

We ask Allāh to inspire us with correctness and to guide us to the path of sound judgment in speech and action. Allāh knows best.

وصَلَّى اللهُ وسلَّم على نبيِّنا محمَّدٍ وعلى آلِه وصَحْبِه أجمعين.

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1st of Rajab, 1428 AH